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IRAQ:

Kurdish Living Conditions at Risk

Living conditions for Iraq's Kurds are likely to deteriorate this winter, and another refugee crisis might occur if Saddam maintains the economic blockade of northern Iraq and supply shortfalls in food, medicine, and fuel cannot be made up by shipments through Turkey.

Saddam initiated a partial blockade last October but tightened it substantially in July. [REDACTED] most supplies of fuel, food, and medicine from central Iraq have been cut off. The Kurds get some food via Turkey and some medicine from relief organizations, but virtually all their fuel comes from the black market in central Iraq. [REDACTED] Kurdish officials are warning that stocks of fuels used for cooking and heating are not nearly adequate to cover normal winter consumption. [REDACTED]

The situation has eased somewhat since the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) last month stopped blockading the shipment of goods from Turkey into northern Iraq. Moreover, the Kurds recently started forcing Turkish truckers to relinquish part of their food and fuel shipments when driving to and from Iraqi-controlled territory. These measures, however, have not eliminated fuel shortages, [REDACTED] and food stocks, drawn down during the short-lived PKK blockade, remain low. [REDACTED] they lack the financial resources to make up the shortfalls, and they are worried about the winter. [REDACTED]

Comment: Information about the risks the Kurds face this winter comes almost exclusively from Kurdish sources, but their economic position does appear worse than last winter. The recent PKK blockade highlights the Kurds' dependence on large shipments from Turkey. Saddam's harassment of UN and private relief agency personnel in Kurdistan will make it increasingly difficult for them to distribute supplies to the Kurds. If the UN guards leave or are expelled, many of the remaining humanitarian workers probably would also go. This would further complicate distribution, add to the Kurds' concerns about their prospects this winter, and possibly foreshadow another refugee exodus—particularly if the Kurds believe the international community will not assist them. If Saddam continues the fuel embargo, even a relatively mild winter could produce some Kurdish refugees, although probably nothing like the exodus of the spring of 1991. [REDACTED]

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